Gary Wayne Rodd
Veteran

Wayne Clarke
Interviewer

New York State Military Museum
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WC: Today is the 11th of January, 2012. My name is Wayne Clarke. I'm with the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. Today we are in Whitehall, New York at the Isaac C. Griswold Library. Sir, for the record, would you please state your full name and date and place of birth, please?
GWR: Yes, Gary Wayne Rodd. Born in Amsterdam, New York on June 28, 1948.

WC: Did you attend school in Amsterdam?
GWR: Yes, I graduated in 1966 from Wilbur H. Lynch High School.

WC: When you graduated from high school, did you go to work or did you go on to college or enter the service?
GWR: I was in a delayed enlistment. I think I joined April of 1966 but then went in August. I was working with Mohawk Carpets for a brief period of time, and then I got a State job. Back then unemployment was rather high. I took a State job just to ensure that I had some kind of job to go back to after I was discharged.

WC: You enlisted in the Marine Corps. Why did you pick the Marine Corps?
GWR: Because I knew that that was going to get me to Vietnam. That was my sole intention. I bought into the evening news, you know, the whole patriotic fervor kind of thing. I really believed that I could go over and make a difference.

WC: So you were anxious to go to Vietnam?
GWR: Oh, yes.

WC: Okay. Now, where did you attend basic training?

GWR: Parris Island for boot camp and then advanced infantry training in North Carolina, at Camp Stone Bay, which is outside of Camp Gregory, I think it was.

WC: How long was that school for?
GWR: Went in August and was finished by mid-December, because I came home for vacation and then went to Vietnam from there. So technically, I was in boot camp in August and I was in combat in January.

WC: How did your parents or family feel about your desire to go to Vietnam?
GWR: They were very much against it. As a matter of fact, I didn't tell them I was going to Vietnam until my last day of being on leave. My father was really upset.

WC: Where did you have to report to once you left home from your leave time?
GWR: Camp Pendleton for more advanced infantry training for more Vietnam.

WC: How long did that training last, approximately?
GWR: About two weeks. Because I was in Vietnam in mid-January.

WC: How did you get to Vietnam?
GWR: Flew over to Okinawa and stayed for five days prior to going into Vietnam. In the Marine Corps, you stopped off at Okinawa, dropped off all your civilian gear. You had all your gear with you. You dropped off your civilian gear and you took your combat gear with you into Vietnam. The tough thing about being in Okinawa was that I was in the detail that offloaded all the killed in action and wounded in action sea bags. Marines who didn't make it back to Okinawa to go on leave or go back home. So that was kind of an eye-opener. Oh my God, there's a lot of people getting killed and wounded here. I wasn't even there yet.

WC: How long were you in Okinawa for?
GWR: Five days.

WC: When you went to Vietnam, how did you go? Was it a commercial flight?
GWR: It was commercial, Flying Tiger Airlines. As a matter of fact, it brought me into Da Nang. From Da Nang to Phu Bai and then into Khe Sanh.

WC: How did you get up to Phu Bai from Da Nang? Was it by helicopter?
GWR: No, by actually a small commercial jet. A marine, of Chinese heritage, and I were on a plane and we were the only two military. It was all civilians going to Phu Bai.

People didn't realize there was life outside the war. And Phu Bai was…well, the funny thing, when I got to Phu Bai, I walked around looking for my regiment.

WC: Right, because there was a Marine installation right there at the airport.
GWR: Correct, yep. Actually, it was a Marine installation at Da Nang and then, not to get too far ahead, I was a replacement. I was just an individual that was given orders from Da Nang to report to Khe Sanh, or actually report to the 26th Marine Regiment in Phu Bai. So when I got to Phu Bai, I walked around looking, nobody knew where the 26th Marines were, and I thought that this was really silly. I got pulled over by a sergeant for having my ID tags on too tight. He reamed me out and he said, Who are you with, hippie? He called me a hippie because I had my ID tags on short. I said, I'm supposed to report to the Golf Company, 26th Marines. He said, They're at Khe Sanh. I said, Where's Khe Sanh? I had no idea. I had to be flown into Khe Sanh. A friend of mine flew in the day before me. He came back and didn't have his rifle, he had nothing. He had to leave everything behind. I said, What the heck are you talking about? He said, They were under fire, they were under siege over there. I was going out the next day. I thought, boy, this doesn't bode well for me. We flew out in a C-123, a very old cargo plane. There were about ten of us Marines in there on top of the cargo because there was no seating room. As we came into Khe Sanh, the plane all of a sudden took a drop, fast. Like dropped straight down. I thought we were shot, you know, the plane was being shot down. There was a dog in with us, and the dog flipped and was peeing over everybody. We landed up next to the cargo net like that [gestures splayed out] because that was what kept us from the pilot. I thought, what the hell is happening here? The plane landed, taxied down the runway, and as he was taxiing down, they told us to throw everything off the plane. So we unloaded all the cargo. The plane slowly turned around, started gaining speed, and we thought, what was going to happen? They said jump. So we had to jump off the back of this plane because mortar rounds were chasing the plane down the runway. So that was my introduction into Khe Sanh. I didn't have any time to worry about what it was going to be like.

WC: Did you have a weapon at that point?
GWR: Yes. Thank God I didn't throw my weapon off first. That happened to my friend the day before. He threw everything off. He threw his combat gear and his weapon right off the plane. But he didn't even get a chance to jump off the plane. So I don't know if it was good or bad, we jumped off the plane. [laughs]

WC: All right. You're on the ground, what happened next?

GWR: Well, of course, you know, nobody told us what to expect and all that, so we were just looking to run for cover. I remember diving into what I thought was a normal depth trench. You know, they were normally four feet or something. These things were almost nine feet deep, and I almost broke my neck diving in there because I didn't think it was that deep. When the mortar attack ended, we just got up, walked around, collected our gear, and helped them move the cargo off the runway. My unit still wasn't at Khe Sanh Base. I was at Khe Sanh Base where the airstrip was. What I just experienced. My unit was out in the jungles, at Hill 558. How do I get out there? They said, there'll be a truck convoy taking me out to my outpost. It was considered an outpost, as they called it. So, I got out there a couple days later.

WC: What was your first night like at Khe Sanh? Were you rocketed or mortared?
GWR: [laughs] No. Marines were taught to use all kinds of equipment, they gave me a machine gun position. They said to me, If at all during the night you get any kind of incoming, we'll give you orders to start firing. Here's your field of fire. It was very specific. Nothing happened. It was very foggy that night, kind of scary.

WC: Were you with somebody else?
GWR: Yes, I was with some other replacements, but we didn't know each other. Nobody actually had any background with each other. Come morning, I heard voices. There was a road that I was overlooking with my field of fire. I heard laughing and talking, and I saw fires being started. I said to the sergeant in charge of us, Who's over there, the enemy? He said, No, those are our allies, South Vietnamese. If we get any kind of incoming, they go with it. We shoot them as well as we do any enemy. So, that was really kind of tough to take. So, like I said, I was never given a break from the day I hit Khe Sanh. It was just a mad sprint to the very end.

WC: What was it like when you got to your unit? How were you accepted as a replacement? Besides being the new guy.
GWR: I actually was the only new guy. I mean, I didn't know what the experience out there was. It was all jungle grass and bamboo, and the grass could be eight to ten feet tall. So you never really got to see a clear view of anything. You were just always going through this dense grass. I was brought out. I don't remember who came to see me. But the first thing they said to me was, Oh, you're here. You've got to break into being a radioman. I said, I wasn't taught how to operate a radio. They said, that's your assignment. Plus you're going to be a grenadier. Okay. I know what a grenadier is. You know, you shoot grenades from a___

WC: A 79 [M79 grenade launcher].
GWR: Yep. So, he said, Well, you're going to learn it fast, especially as a radioman. He's leaving in a couple hours. He was catching his flight out. I basically taught myself and also walked up and down the perimeter and talked to other radio operators about what they did. So, I taught myself quite a bit. I felt quite proud of it. But also, we ran early warning devices. There were wires that ran out to sensors, and we had a real crude form of radar. It was like a square box that you aimed outside the perimeter and picked up different sounds, we were especially interested in engine sounds. So I got those assignments with only having a rifleman's MOS, Military Occupational Standard. That was what I was trained to be, a rifleman.

WC: How long was it before you were sent outside the wire?
GWR: [ponders] We could go outside the wire. We couldn't go on anymore patrols. Shortly after I got there, they lost a platoon of men. Never heard shots or anything, so they said, We can't afford to lose that many people in one clip. So they suspended all patrols. But we had listening posts where we went outside our perimeter, laid down there at night, stayed real quiet and listened for enemy movement. Which was rather scary.

WC: You were on a listening post, just you or somebody else?
GWR: No, it was three or four of us who went out. One manned the radio and the rest slept, basically. You had two hours on and the rest you slept. So that was why they had, I think, three or four guys. But you weren't just allowed to shoot anything or anything like that. We just listened for movement.

WC: And did you hear any movement out there?
GWR: No. It's amazing what was out in the grass at night, you know, all these little birds running around. I mean, everything was scaring the hell out of you. Yeah. Because you didn't expect to hear snakes going through the grass and other small animals.

WC: Did you have a Starlite scope?
GWR: Yes. I think they were worthless. Because I was a radioman, I had a bunker to myself. As a matter of fact, nobody wanted to be around a radioman because they were prime targets. Machine gunners and radiomen were prime targets for the enemy. They lobbed either grenades or shot mortar rounds or rockets at us. But I forget where I was going with this. Being out in the perimeter.

WC: Yep. Listening post.

GWR: The listening post. But there was something else. Now my mind's going ahead of myself on this. Okay, the listening post, we went out every night, basically. And also we went on water runs because we didn't have any source of water within our perimeter. We went to this river, I think it was the Perfume River, and set up a perimeter or defense around there while guys filled up these big five-gallon containers. We used everything we could, empty rocket shells, mortar canisters. Anything that held water, we filled that up and went back.

WC: Was that water purified at all?
GWR: No.

WC: You guys didn't drink that, did you?
GWR: Yes, yes. We wondered why it was frothy. Some guys came down with dysentery and they did some investigation after this happened. They said, wait a minute, We've got to coordinate these water runs. This platoon was up on the river at this point in time. This platoon was down here at this time and that time. And they started thinking that we were drinking each other's bathwater, which was why it was frothy. I avoided getting dysentery at that time.

I only had a shirt, a pair of pants. This was a little while into it, being at Hill 558 on the outpost. We couldn't get food, couldn't get supplies, and of course clothing was not high on the list. So I end up having no underwear, no socks, one shirt, one pair of pants. I volunteered to take the other radio operator's turns to go outside the perimeter because that way I could bathe every day just to keep clean. Didn't have soap, didn't have razors or anything like that. Needless to say, the other guys were happy that I took their water runs. But they thought I was nuts because just about every time you went out of the perimeter, you drew fire from the NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. So it was a constant shooting back and forth.

WC: Was it rifle fire you were getting mostly?
GWR: Machine gun, because they had some pretty good…it was kind of complicated, the Marine outpost there. You had Khe Sanh base itself with the airstrip, and then you had, oh, about six different outposts all around the base. We were [outpost] 558, and then there was 950, 1015, 861, and something to the south that I can't remember. So we were basically out there to offer protection from any assault by the NVA onto the base itself, which theoretically, you know, we were like civs out there. We didn't stop any NVA movement. They moved at will.

WC: You mentioned you didn't have food. Were you talking about fresh food? Were you eating C-rations?
GWR: Okay, yeah. Once in a while I jump ahead of myself. They actually had a mess hall at the end of the runway. I remember having one or two meals there before I was shipped out to my outpost. Shortly after I was shipped out there, one of the C-130s got shot, got damaged, and it slid and took the mess tent right down. Swept that all away, killed the mess sergeant and the crew in there. That was the last of anybody getting fresh food. From that point on, at the outpost, we couldn't get supplied that easily because of either fog, the weather, or the enemy shooting at our planes or helicopters. The helicopters thought that was too dangerous, so they came back at another time. Because every time we were to get supplied…they called it the flying circus. It was the big choppers, the___

WC: CH-46? Sea Knights or Chinooks?
GWR: Chinooks is what they called them. That's right. They were way up in the air circling around. Of course, the jets came in and strafed the area, bombed and napalmed it. Then one by one, the choppers came down and dropped off our supplies in a pre-designated area. Because it started getting so tight in the weather,we were getting into monsoon season, we only got two C-ration meals a day. One of the biggest problems they had was a breakdown of discipline. Guys used to do low crawls into the supply area and low crawl back out with a case of C-rations on their back. We were very hungry. I mean, there were no overweight Marines in that perimeter.

WC: Were you involved in any of the heavy combat, or direct combat with the NVA?
GWR: At the time I was wounded, that's what ended my…I have it as April 6th, they have it as April 7th, and I think it's because of the date change. Palm Sunday was when I was wounded. We were the first company out of the perimeter to test the NVA's strengths out there. It was Good Friday. To give you an idea of what we had out there, even though we were a combat base, airstrip, and all the outposts, there was a French coffee plantation in that area and they had a little French community. A priest came up and gave us services. That was on Holy Friday. Then Saturday was our first venture outside the perimeter, and we took quite a few casualties that first day because we didn't know what we were running into. We didn't know if it was a company or battalion or regiment of NVA.

WC: What size unit did you go out with?
GWR: We went out with a company. Which was very unusual. But, you know, when you look back, the person who made the decision to send us out must have realized that the

NVA was very much aware of the size unit that was going out there. If you were sending a company out, you were not out scouting. We were looking to attack somebody. So, they were very well entrenched. I mean, we did it in broad daylight. By the time we hit the top of the hill, and I was very lucky, we were leapfrogging a platoon at a time up through. My unit was next to go up over the top. They said, You guys hold it here, and then the next platoon will come through you and set in at the top of the hill. Well, as soon as they came through us, all hell broke loose. That's when the NVA opened fire on our troops with machine gunners, and we lost quite a few Marines in that platoon. We realized that we didn't have enough to continue with the assault. So, we set in. And to keep the NVA from counterattacking and coming through us, jets provided napalm and bombing runs to get the NVA away from us so we could retreat back off the hill. So, on the first day of fighting we lost, I don't know, there wasn't much left of that platoon. I know they had to leave five Marines back. They must have been killed because we didn't have enough help to retrieve their bodies. So we were just focused on getting the wounded choppered off the mountain, medevaced. We withdrew from the mountain, went back to our perimeter. You kind of thought there'd be somebody around to give you some hot food and stuff, and there was nothing. So we had to make do with whatever we had because we had to go back out the following morning. We had to leave our perimeter at four o'clock and re-assault that hill. We were the Golf Company and they brought Foxtrot Company from 861. It was kind of funny, we were 558, we had a company of Marines on 861 and the NVA were on 861 Alpha. They were there all that whole time. We never dislodged them. With shrapnel, and serious bombing runs. We just never disengaged those guys. The second day, we worked through, it was very hot and we were starting to lose people through heat exhaustion, heat stroke. By the time we got online for our charge, out of thirty three Marines in my platoon, there were only thirteen of us left. And they gave the order, we had to charge.

WC: Now, let me just interrupt you for a second. Were you carrying a full combat field pack?
GWR: I was carrying a radio pack, extra mortar rounds, and extra machine gun rounds in addition to my own. I always carried four hundred rounds of ammunition on me, and so I was pretty heavily weighed down. So when we got online to charge, the NVA was not only shooting, engaging us, but Foxtrot was coming across the ridgeline from 861 to 861 Alpha. Again, the enemy was on 861 Alpha. They were coming across a ridgeline. The NVA were mortaring behind them and they had an ambush on both sides of the ridgeline. So, they said, You've got to make a move. You've got to knock out that machine gun and mortar position that was wreaking havoc on Foxtrot. Well, obviously we didn't make it. I was shot three times with a machine gun, but thank God only one round went through. I

had a doubled-over flak jacket. I was really skinny back in those days and I had an extra large flak jacket and had to tie it to me because it was so big it flopped all over the place. I used to complain all the time about that flak jacket. I didn't know that it was going to save my life. Because the second round actually broke my M16 right in half and then the third round of course got me.

WC: So you took two rounds to the stomach?
GWR: Yeah, I had broken ribs where they hit. But no penetration, thank God. Just big giant bruises. But the third round…what's ironic is that it was an armor-piercing round. I had, of course, my radio pack on, and big buckles that came over the shoulder. It hit the buckle, blew the buckle through me and out my scapula.

WC: Ah, jeez.
GWR: I have the complete bullet here that they took out of me. That hurt. But I thought that that was all. I had no idea that I was shot. There was smoke and then blood was spurting. I thought I must have been grazed by something. The machine gun and gunfire was just unbelievable. So I was crawling around looking for someplace to go. I saw this fighting hole.

WC: And your weapon was useless, right?
GWR: It was totally useless and I had all this ammo on me. No way to protect myself. As a radio operator, you were supposed to have a sidearm, a .45 caliber, but they couldn't equip us with any of that kind of stuff. So I crawled over to the fighting hole, and I remember from our training, [they said] don't go into fighting holes because they're booby-trapped. I looked and I saw this NATO blue grenade land. It was like the old pineapple thing. I thought it looked just like a training grenade. When these things were happening, of course I was kind of loopy from being shot. Then this grenade landed about ten feet from me and I thought, gee, it's not smoking. Because I was thinking [it was] a training grenade, the smoke came out, it just popped and fizzed. I said, I better not take any chances. As soon as I dropped down, I looked at the grenade and it exploded. Of course, it got me all across my lower right back and through my right leg, this arm, and my cheek, and some other parts. They were all cauterized. So, was it___

WC: It was a Chaicom [Chinese Communist] grenade?
GWR: No, it was, I think, a NATO grenade from the 1950s. It was NATO blue. Then of course I found out the NVA had a lot of NATO equipment that they got from other encounters. And probably the machine gun I was shot with was probably a NATO issue. Because they got them from the Chinese or however they came about them. They didn't

use all communist-made weapons. So when that grenade went off, I thought that was the end of me, you know, but they finally got me out of there. I maintained radio contact when I was in the hole. I kept hearing these gigantic explosions all around me, and I thought they were the enemy using some kind of big guns or whatever. It was our recoilless rifle in our position that was trying to drive the NVA back. Of course, they had no idea where any of us were because you couldn't visually spot us. The serious situation I was in…my battalion radio operator called out and I responded. And he said to me, Where are you? I said, I'm up here with the rest of the guys. He said, You gotta get out of there. There's nobody left. I couldn't get out. I could only use my left arm. After a while I was bleeding so bad here [points to right arm], and it was very upsetting. I thought I got to stop this bleeding somehow. I just kept putting dirt in there, packing it in, because what I don't see is not going to bother me. I had no idea it was bleeding so bad out the back. When we finally got reinforcements that was how I was saved.

And one other funny thing, you know how you always fight against certain things? I fought against having my antenna stick up. I had a whip antenna. On the first day of fighting, my lieutenant had dysentery. My lieutenant was very nervous about going out, so the first day he didn't go with us. And that lieutenant allowed me to have a tape antenna so I wouldn't be advertising that I was a radioman. Well, my lieutenant the second day said, You're carrying a whip antenna. I said to him, Well, you might as well put a flag on it too. Why not advertise more that I'm a radioman? But what's ironic is if I didn't have that whip antenna sticking out of the hole, they probably would have never found me. Yeah. So it was a weird combination of a flak jacket being doubled over because it was too big, that saved my life, and the whip antenna sticking up out of the hole.

WC: Did you lose consciousness at all?
GWR: No, no. As a matter of fact, after they carried me out of there and stripped me naked. They threw me on a helicopter totally naked and put an A on my forehead. A For being alive. They put either A or D so they could act quickly when they were offloading the bodies. I remember being in the bottom of that chopper and I thought, I can't pass out because I didn't want to take a chance that they might decide I was dead.

WC: Yeah.
GWR: I didn't want to be thrown in the dead pile. So no, I stayed conscious the whole time. It was very painful. It would have been easy to slip into…as a matter of fact, I don't know how I didn't go into shock. I did neither of those. I stayed awake until they took me into the operating room.

WC: Did they bring you directly to Khe Sanh?
GWR: That's what happened. When they flew me down to the combat base hospital there, I mean, I was in unbelievable pain. I couldn't believe anything like that. The grenade caused more pain than the bullet. I was flipping around thinking, Oh my God, give me something for pain. This is really hurting. And they said to me, We can't because of the shrapnel wounds to your spine. They didn't know if it went into my organs or whatnot, so they couldn't give me any pain [medicine]. I mean, that was their rationale.

WC: Did you have feeling in your legs?
GWR: No, I thought I lost my legs. I mean, they were still there, but the concussion from that grenade going off caused some paralysis for however long, I can't remember. But there was a guy in a stretcher next to me and they were giving him last rites. His stomach was all blown apart. I said to myself, you know, I think I'm going to live. This guy obviously wasn't. So that kind of calmed me down, just deal with it, deal with the pain. Sooner or later you're going to be operated on. So they choppered me out of there to a hospital in Phu Bai, where they did the operation.

WC: How long were you in Phu Bai for?
GWR: Quite a short period of time, it may have been a couple days. Oh, an interesting thing, when they were putting me on the chopper, again, I was never very good with the smaller [helicopters]…it was a Korean vintage chopper, like a little medevac chopper. They threw us all in there. There were no stretchers. You weren't put on a stretcher, you were just thrown in naked or whatever else was in there. They put me on a stretcher to be taken up the Phu Bai to be operated on. They were stacking us in the side of the chopper like we were cordwood or something. They were just trying to get as many people on the chopper to get them out of there. I remember, the helicopter was taking off, the door slid open and the machine gunners started shooting. And I was thinking, I'm going to get killed right here in this stretcher. But that was when I passed out, on the chopper. When I came to, it was like some kind of real weird movie. I heard some sucking sound to the right of me. I looked and there was a Vietnamese person. I was in a hospital ward. It was a Vietnamese guy to my right, on some kind of a ventilator, something with a really loud sucking sound that was causing him to bend with each contraction or whatever. I looked to the left of me and there was this Vietnamese woman naked from the waist up on the bed next to me. I thought, I got shot, I'm in an NVA hospital. My heart was racing like crazy. What the hell is going on here? And then I saw this corpsman walking towards me with a wash bowl and washcloth. I looked at him and said, I think you're American, but am I in an NVA hospital? He said, No, you're in the overflow wing at Phu Bai. He said

there were a lot of civilian casualties that were going out at the same time as military casualties. They just didn't have enough room in the military ward to put me until a couple days later. But then I was flown down to Cam Ranh Bay Hospital, a big Air Force base. That was where I spent a month before my condition went worse, and then they sent me home to be closer in case I was going to die from the infections.

WC: You said your condition got worse. What happened?
GWR: This may or may not have been a contributing factor, but when I was packing the dirt in the entry wound, I got a bone infection through the scapula, which wasn't too far back in there. I packed an awful lot of dirt in there. I had a staph infection and a bone infection. Even though I had a fractured scapula from the gunshot wound and quite a few holes in my back and right leg, it was the infection that was going to kill me, not the wounds itself. So, I was in very bad condition for almost six months. Again, not from the wounds so much as the infections.

WC: So, you were at Cam Ranh Bay for about a month?
GWR: Cam Ranh Bay for roughly a month, yes.

WC: And then, how did you go back to the States, on a hospital ship?
GWR: An airplane. It was a Starlifter [Lockheed C-141], I think that was what they called them. They converted them into flying hospitals. So we went from Vietnam to Japan to Alaska to Andrews Air Force Base. Yeah, I think it was Andrews Air Force Base. Stayed at a hospital there and then was shipped over to St. Albans Naval Hospital in Brooklyn, or outside of Brooklyn. I think it's actually in Queens. I spent roughly five months there before being discharged back to active duty.

WC: Wow.
GWR: But when I was in the Air Force Hospital, all the nurses were officers. And this one woman, she was probably middle-aged, of course I was nineteen, twenty. She was like a lieutenant colonel, and I used to get a kick out of saluting. I couldn't use my right arm, so I saluted them with my left hand. Of course, they snapped to and saluted back to me, and I didn't dare tell them that I shouldn't be saluting them left-handed, but that was just my little inside joke. She was a Lieutenant Lieutenant Colonel, and said, They're going to offer you a medical discharge, but I recommend you don't take it. That you stay in. I took her advice. I think I could have been___

WC: Did she say why?
GWR: She felt it would be a detriment to me for any career that I wanted to get into.

WC: I see.
GWR: Because of the so-called stigma of being disabled. Even though it was combat disabled, you would be disabled. As a matter of fact, it probably would have prevented me from being a parole officer, now retired. So I took her advice and stuck it out.

WC: So you spent five months in the hospital. You went through a rehab program?
GWR: They didn't have that back in those days. Okay. I mean, I don't want to damn the Navy, but you had one nurse who was the administrator and then you had a couple corpsmen that took care of all these seriously wounded Marines and sailors and soldiers.

WC: But was there any sort of therapy because of your shoulder?
GWR: Nothing.

WC: You just had to let it naturally heal?
GWR: Yes, as a matter of fact, because of my infection, all the sutures that they gave me had to be cut loose and let me heal from the inside out. They went back to, I guess they figured it was World War I technology for medical treatment. They kept me high on antibiotics and high on painkillers too. So as a consequence, my scars are probably bigger than they would have been had I not been infected.

WC: While you were stateside in the hospital, did you get to go home at all on weekends at all?
GWR: Yes, every other weekend I went home on convalescent leave. But what was funny is I had to be healthy enough to go on leave. So, you had to pass certain urine tests, if you went to the bathroom, that kind of thing. Of course, they did blood tests on you. I was at fault for my first time out on leave. I should have probably returned back to the hospital when my thigh started swelling on me. It was so good being home. I had a girlfriend at the time, dating, and trying to get back to a regular life, although they had no clue. That's another whole story. But they just looked upon somebody, alright, he's walking around with a limp he's got scars all over. Actually, they were all open wounds. When I should have gone back, I didn't. I waited until my last day and they had to do an emergency operation on my right thigh because the infection had traveled up into my thigh. I had to cut my utility trousers in order to get my pants on. That was how bad my leg got. And they were thinking of court-martialing me for that. They said, You were in an awful lot of pain, you should have been back here sooner. I said, Well, can you blame me? You gave me fourteen days. I was gonna take all fourteen days. But I should have gone back maybe at seven. They did this operation. I had this big big drain coming out. I

was high on Darvon or Percocet or whatever they gave us for pain control. They said, You have got to clean your own wound. We don't have enough people to take care of you. I took all this packing out and stuff and took a Q-tip and was hitting it.This stuff didn't want to come out. And I realized it was my bone. Oh my God. But that was the kind of treatment you got because they were short-staffed. Because of most of the military, the corpsmen and nurses and whatnot were over in Vietnam. This is my way of thinking anyways, to why there was such a shortage of medical staff in stateside hospitals. But if you loved staying high, it was really a good place to be. It was much easier to take care of patients who were high and deal with their pain that way than have them deal with it under normal circumstances.

WC: Once you were discharged from the hospital, where did they send you next?
GWR: Well, I had two choices. I could have gone to California. But because I was dating a girl and thinking I was going to marry her, I decided to stay in Brooklyn. So they assigned me to the Third Naval District Correctional Center, also known as a brig. I went from being a patient one day to being on twelve hour standing duty a day working in the brig. There was no easing you back into an assignment. I hadn't done any full duty in six months. So, that was really, really a tough adjustment because they didn't…[they said] you're cleared to come back full duty. You can't stand, we're not going to give you…there was no such thing as light duty. So, I went back to full duty.

WC: And what kind of quarters did you have? Were you living in civilian quarters or military?
GWR: There was a wing set aside just for the Brig Centuries. We were on a naval base, and of course, the Marines were isolated. There was a lot of animosity back in those days between Marines and the Navy. I never bought into it. The guys wanted to get all souped up and fight with some sailors in a bar and stuff like that. I used to say to them, What does it say on your paycheck? It doesn't say United States Marine Corps. It says, Department of the Navy. I said, These people are paying us. I don't feel like I want to fight with people who are paying me. So that was my attitude, my approach to it.

WC: How long were you there for?
GWR: October of 1968 to September of 1969. I was blessed with some really unusual experiences. I was in both astronaut parades. They orbited the moon, so the ticker tape parade was in January, and then when they landed on the moon, it was in July 1969. We were out there in our dress blues. So we went from freezing to death in January because in dress blues, all you can get is a t-shirt underneath that jacket. Of course, in July, we were out there sweating to death in dress blues because they drew such heat. But, you

know, being in both ticker tape parades was quite an experience. Not only did we run the brig, but we were the Colonel's Crack Parade Unit, and also we did a lot of burial details too. It was quite interesting. Some of it was disturbing, especially the burial details. The parades were always kind of neat. And when you were off duty…they never gave much thought to you getting sleep. You were on six hours, off six hours, on six hours. During the day, during the six hours off, you either somehow got sucked into some parade detail, funeral detail, and plus you had to relieve the on-duty guys to go off and have their lunchtime or suppertime break. That kind of thing. So, you never ever got even a six-hour stretch where you could sleep because you never got six hours. So, the guys didn't like it very much. A lot of guys went AWOL. In the Marine Corps, when you went AWOL, they really, really treated you bad. I had to supervise some of the guys that I was assigned to the barracks with. That was tough. Dealing with the guy that I was sharing meals with a week ago who went AWOL and is now back in the brig as a prisoner.

WC: When you were in the hospital, did you encounter anyone that had been under fire with you when you were wounded?
GWR: I ran across a guy years later. As a matter of fact, before we started this, I told you about a guy in my unit that went back to Vietnam. He was wounded the day before I was. He was wounded on that Saturday, I was wounded on Sunday. And a good friend of mine was killed on that Saturday. He went back and got some souvenir soil for me and anybody else that was still alive from Hill 861 Alpha. But actually spending time with anybody that experienced that, no. There may have been a few guys from when I was in Phu Bai for a short period of time. But after that when I went down to Cam Ranh Hospital, I was with sailors, soldiers, and Marines down there. All different branches of service at that hospital. Going over to Vietnam, I was by myself. When I was in hospital, I was by myself. As far as not being with anybody I served with.

WC: So you were discharged from that last duty station?
GWR: Yes. Not because my time was up. The Marines were being pulled out of Vietnam in 1969, and they had all of us old salts. Like seventy percent of the Marines in my barracks were Purple Heart recipients, Silver Stars, Bronze Stars, all kinds of awards for valor. We were kind of a salty unit too. But I kept thinking, I got another year to go. It was really tough duty. Our colonel was a real tough disciplinarian. If he caught you out of uniform, if something on your ribbon was not quite right, he said, Did I promote you? [We said] Sir, yes, sir. [He said] I'm demoting you. Report to my office, that kind of thing. He was a really tough colonel. And everybody had to play basketball with him and he was a real dirty player. But that was the way he operated. I remember getting called in by the warrant officer. I became a sergeant in charge of the brig because I was one of the

few guys that messed up. And I kept saying, I signed up for the Marine Corps for three years and I'm not going to give them a day more. My attitude towards the Marine Corps started changing at the brig in Brooklyn. I got called in. My gunnery sergeant and the warrant officer and I were close. Those two were close with me because they liked the way I ran the brig. They said, Gary, we got some good news and bad news for you. I said, Well? What's the good news? I want to hear that first. He said, We are going to allow you to re-enlist. I said, what's the bad news? He said, you're going to go home soon. [laughs] I said, I'm going to go home. They said, the reason we called you in here, is we want you to re-enlist and become an officer. That's when I said to them, this is off the record. I have so much respect for you guys, but I've seen the way the current Colonel disrespected you. I want nothing more of this Marine Corps. Because they were two combat vets also. I don't remember what the Colonel's history was, but the treatment of his officers, his enlisted ranks, I'm saying officer ranks, like above E-5, was very poor. So, that was what allowed me to get out early. It was for the convenience of the government was how I got my discharge. So I served just under twenty six months.

WC: Once you were discharged, you came back home?
GWR: Yes.

WC: Did you go to work or go to school?
GWR: No, I went straight back to my State job as a mail and supply clerk. And in the interim, I had taken a correction officer exam. Because when I was working in the brig, we also took continuing education courses in the brig. I got into corrections and a correction officer was paid like eighty six hundred dollars a year. I was making forty seven hundred dollars. That was is a no-brainer. I got discharged in September, I was back at my job as mail and supply clerk. I had taken the correction officer exam, and they wanted me to report for duty in February of 1970. I showed up thinking it was an interview. I didn't realize that they wanted me to work that day. So I started March 5th as a correction officer.

WC: Whereabouts?
GWR: In Green Haven Correctional Facility. So it was like going almost from the frying pan into the fire because then Attica jumped off that year too, 1970. Green Haven wasn't a tough prison to work at. Mostly lifers down there and they followed the rules so that they wouldn't get transferred out for bad behavior. Because the number one assignment down at Green Haven was visiting. The visiting room was constantly packed seven days a week. Six months after I started at Green Haven, I went up to Comstock to work. Great Meadow [Correctional Facility]. It had quite a tough reputation, and it was. But, you

know, I was in the Marine Corps, so I could handle that. It wasn't like I was a civilian going in that kind of environment.

WC: How long were you a correctional officer for?
GWR: I think four years. Then I was a correctional sergeant, then a personnel administrator, then a correction counselor. In my last fifteen years, I moved over into a parole officer before retiring in 2003.

WC: Did you have any college with that?
GWR: When I came back from the Marine Corps, I took a two-year leave of absence to get my associate degree through Adirondack Community College, which is now SUNY Adirondack. Then I got my bachelor's degree through Empire State College, when it was pretty much in its infancy. I got my bachelor's in applied science, criminal justice being my major. That was it in a nutshell.

WC: When did you retire?
GWR: December 2003. People say to me, it was military time too. I said, Yeah, think of how many people, how they spent their military time. It was quite a bit different. I have no regrets about it. Everything that happened to me in the service, I look at it this way, I survived it and I benefited from it. Kind of kept me a little different from my peers. When you have those kinds of…and they're going to find that out more as these Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans come back. That whole can of worms is going to reopen itself because the population has no idea what these people really encountered. And that was my problem also. I couldn't relate to anybody. I remember going back as a mail and supply clerk and obviously I must have changed in my behavior. They actually had the nerve to say to me, we'd like to have the old Gary back. I said, He died. He's over in Vietnam. This is the new guy you got to deal with. Because I went from being a kid to being a sergeant in the Marine Corps. So, of course, I didn't know I changed, but they really made me aware that I changed. They were actually part of the reason why I was in such a hurry to get away from that office scenario. Because I was the little darling. At that time, I was the only eighteen year-old in that office complex of four hundred women and all these male supervisors and whatnot. They used to send me packages [and addressed it as from], your OSR, harem. OSR meaning, Out of state residence office. And harem. I mean, they adored me. But they adored only this little eighteen-year-old. When I came back, they were like, Ooh! Shocked at my behavior. The way that they received me just pushed me into corrections that quick.

WC: Have you had any ongoing medical problems from being wounded?

GWR: No, knock on wood. You know, there are things that come on with age. That's going to be the problem. But I stay very active and I feel sorry…I shouldn't damn. The Albany VA called me in. They reevaluate you periodically. I still have shrapnel in my shoulder. All these doctors came up with different ways…let's go through his chest to get the shrapnel that's underneath his scapula, and let's do this and let's do that. I called up and said to the chief of surgeons, I just saw two doctors and they have totally different diagnoses. He goes, pick the one that you think is best. I said, thank God I don't need this. But you had to be careful because if you refused an operation, they would say, Oh, then we're going to take this disability away from you. Because I was receiving compensation. And that's another thing. People misunderstand that disability is different from compensation. I was compensated for the gunshot wound and the fragmentation wound to my lower back and right leg. So I was actually receiving compensation for three different injuries or wounds.

WC: Have you suffered from post-traumatic stress at all?
GWR: Yeah, I wouldn't like to go into detail, but yeah.

WC: Okay, sure. All right, I'm actually getting low on film now, so I'd like to put in another cassette and we can look at some of the artifacts you have.
GWR: Yes, great.

WC: Okay, do you have any questions? I've got a couple minutes left.
[Unidentified male speaker]: Was there any time when you or the other Marines thought that you could actually lose that base?
GWR: As a matter of fact, we never thought we could keep it. We knew we were badly outnumbered there. So yeah, the answer to your question is we were surprised that we stayed there as long as we did. But we also realized the only thing that kept us there was the air support. If we didn't have the air support, we would have gone out like the French did. Khe Sanh was known as Dien Bien Phu with the French. And that's when Johnson used to say, I don't want another damn Dien Bien Phu, he used to call it. He didn't want Khe Sanh to fall like it did with the French in the 1950s.

[Unidentified male speaker]: What was your estimation of the fighting abilities, not just the NVA and Viet Cong, but also the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam]?
GWR: The ARVN, I never got to experience much with them other than maybe shooting them if we got hit that night. But the NVA, I had a lot of respect for them. Really well disciplined. They knew all of our names in the perimeter because they always came down and listened to us at night bullshitting, and even during the daytime. So a lot of times you

heard, Hey, Gary, and it was not in the perimeter, it was them down there. I mean, they had tunnels dug right up along our trench lines, everything. Periodically some bombing runs came close and collapsed their tunnels outside of our perimeter. Then you started thinking, we ought to run some bombing runs close periodically just to collapse all those tunnels. Because our big fear was they tunneled up into our perimeter.

WC: Right. Let me stop there. [tape change] All right. You want to continue with your question?
[Unidentified male speaker]: Did you have any unpleasant circumstances when you came back with people against the war?
GWR: Oh yeah. You didn't realize how much animosity there was towards the war, and of course, it was vented at us. Especially, I want to say Marines, only because of my experiences in the Brooklyn Brig. We had part of our details with parades and funerals. I forgot to mention we also had riot control. We went out with…of course, all of us Marines were combat vets and we knew all the formations and stuff, but they interspersed every other man with a sailor. Those poor guys were really on edge, nervous when we had to face demonstrators who were throwing stuff at us, intimidating us. But, you know, Marines knew that if we were gonna use our batons, we were gonna definitely use them. And the sailors didn't have that kind of background. I gave no thought to what we had to do until I was in line with these sailors who had no combat experience. And they were really kind of nervous about it.

Just to talk about things at the perimeter. At Khe Sanh, at Hill 558, one of your duties was listening for tunneling. We drove these rods into the ground and you just stood there for periods of time just listening for any kind of tunneling going through. [gestures hand to ear and listening] So yes, we actually set that procedure up after we realized that they had tunneled outside of our perimeter.

[Unidentified male speaker]: And did you ever hear anything?
GWR: I didn't. We heard them at nighttime talking to each other. One of the scariest things was getting a human wave attack. The way they set them up was…you thought you were in a movie. That this wasn't real. You saw lights that you realized were flashlights. And then there was somebody with a drum beating signals for them how to get on line. Of course, before they charged, they unloaded their artillery on us. They were trying to blow out our barbed wire and detonate our minefields. I only had one of those and it was bad enough. I think everybody pooped and peed their pants because it was just outrageous.

WC: Were you on Khe Sanh?
GWR: Hill at 558, yes. And that was probably the most scared I ever was in my life because you realized you would never have enough ammunition. But the only thing that saved us was, I think, naval artillery fire. Maybe it was from Camp Carroll where they had the big guns. We had 105mms in our perimeter and they had 155mms and the NVA had, I think, the equivalent of 175mms. That night…that's right, it was from Camp Carroll because a lot of the rounds were falling short and landing behind us, which were making gigantic craters. And thank God nobody got wounded in our perimeter from that. If things were quiet, you heard from our combat base where the airstrip was, because we had a 106mm. That was the biggest weapon we had in our perimeter. And they had 105mms at the combat base. You heard poom, poom. They were shooting at the NVA positions to draw out their fire. And all you heard was toot, toot from our end, and then you heard waboom, waboom from that end. And I said to the guys, what the hell is wrong with this picture? What the hell? How come we don't have anything like that? Well, what they were doing was trying to get positions on where those cannons were so they could get them in an arc light. Then they saturated, completely bombed a grid on a map from the air. I mean, they completely blew away a whole section of territory. But they never caught those guns. Never caught them out in the open. That was what they were hoping for. They coordinated it so that when they shot out towards the NVA and came out with their guns to return fire, that was the arc light. They were hoping that it was all coordinated so they could catch them out in the open. Because they had to come out of the tunnels to shoot those cannons. Of course, I never saw pictures of them. I knew what they sounded like and I knew what it felt like when they did, when they hit some rounds at us.

[Unidentified male speaker]: I've read that they had tanks. Not us, them.
GWR: Oh, yeah. I had a problem with my lieutenant because of that. As a matter of fact, when I mentioned another radio operator, [Anthony "Tony" John Pepper] Tony Pepper. [gets emotional] [tape skip] Oh, hearing tanks. And of course, they brought that up first because he was up further on the perimeter than I was. They used to call me Diarrhea Legs because I was all over the perimeter. I was like the mayor of the perimeter too. I was talking to him and said, I keep hearing things at night up this way. What do you get? He said, I got them too, plus we see headlights. I started coordinating with him the times that we heard this and tried to get information together, and presented it to my lieutenant. He said, Intelligence says there's nothing up there. There are no tanks at all that the NVA have because of the mountainous area. How are they going to get them there? There were no roads up that way. I mean, this is what he told me. And I couldn't go any further with that information. There was a Green Beret outpost not too far outside of us. And it was

manned with the Green Beret and the Bru, which were the native Vietnamese. The French called them Montagnards, mountain people. Their perimeter got overrun. That was in late February. I remember I heard the transmission from the Green Beret radio operator said, We've got to get the hell out of here. There's tanks coming into our perimeter. I think it was five NVA tanks that overran that perimeter. But again, there was none according to our intelligence. So yes, there were. I believe there were tanks. I heard them.

[Unidentified male speaker]: I heard that there were.
GWR: Yeah. I'm sure there were probably more than that too. From the area where I was, I'm sure there were others. I have to share, if I ever run across guys that were on Hill 1015 and 950, I have to salute them because they had a much tougher time than we did. Because they couldn't get food up there at all because they were so high up in the mountains and they were up on these very narrow mountaintops. They had only a platoon in the whole perimeter up there and they were left. The NVA periodically assaulted them just to try to dislodge them off of there. So those poor guys. Even though we saw daily action. Whether it was bombing, snipers, machine gun fire coming in at us, they had it every night. It was almost like a battle to the end. And I don't even know how the heck we got enough equipment up there for them to even survive any kind of assault. But so again, it goes back to, as bad as you think you have it, there were other people that got it worse.

[Unidentified male speaker]: You've brought some things in with you.
GWR: Yes. [shows a frame with a photos and medals] This is the actual little display case that Shar [wife] and I put together, which has a picture of me in my perimeter.

WC: Actually, if you can tilt that towards me a little more, I'm getting glare. That's perfect. Just like that.
GWR: That's my M16 that was shot apart the day I was wounded. Here's the armor-piercing .30 caliber round that got me. And the irony is, if that didn't hit my buckle, I would have had a pretty clean wound. But it hit my buckle, and of course it mushroomed like crazy. You can still see the core of the jacket. That almost round circle in here is the actual tip of the bullet. And I'm sure there's probably some other pieces that are either still in me or went through. But that bullet was taken out in 1978. No. [discusses with Shar out of camera view] 1986. Actually, the only thing I had was the core. A corpsman cut that. Corpsman practiced sewing you up and cutting things out and stuff. I should say it wasn’t a corpsman, it was an Air Force nurse. He took that out for me at Cam Ranh Bay. I don't know if I sent it home. I don't know how I managed to keep that without losing it.

Then in 1986, these additional pieces came out because I had a tumor develop on the exit hole of the scar. And of course, this is a typical [military portrait] picture taken in advanced infantry training in North Carolina. These are, you know, standard issues [medals] from here over. The Purple Heart. National Defense Medal, Vietnam Campaign, Vietnam Service and End Campaign. This is something I got. This medal was thrown on the table by, at that time, the Veterans Counselor. At that time, it was Governor Rockefeller. It was a Conspicuous Service Medal from the State of New York. And the little extra cross on there. You got that if you were in combat, and then if you got wounded, you got an extra little identifying thing. It's not an oak leaf cluster or anything else like that. After I was discharged, they came up with issuing these medals to us Jar heads. Oh, let me take this. This will continue the story. This is my Purple Heart Certificate. [shows certificate] And on there it states it was April 7th I was wounded. The date of the receipt of the Purple Heart was quite interesting. It was October 21st, 1968. So either they had one hell of a backlog, or there was not that much interest in issuing Purple Hearts at any specific time. I got a Purple Heart when I was a patient in the hospital. So then they just must have issued the certificate separate from the Purple Heart itself.

But with the Marine Corps, this represents this little ribbon up here. There's a Naval…I don't want to say commemorative, but to recognize the Gulf Company 26th Marines and actually the 26th Marine Regiment for what they did in Vietnam. We had the Presidential Unit Citation. [shows medal] They didn't have a ribbon back in those days. You just had a little ribbon given to you. And there's the Combat Action Ribbon and the Naval Unit Citation. Presidential Unit Citation, which I found out after I got discharged. This is the Combat Action Medal. [shows medal] They didn't have a ribbon per se. It's now only like a commemorative one. But that's all you had with your uniform. This would go over this.

GWR: Did you get any of those? [addresses question to someone off camera]
[Unidentified male speaker]: I got a Combat Action [ribbon] and an NUC [Naval Unit Commendation]. No, they're an actual ribbon. You've seen mine. But I was in Vietnam four years after you. There's a difference there.

GWR: But also because there's another ribbon. I bet you I forgot that one on the table.
WC: There's one by your left foot.

GWR: Here's my other Purple Heart. They actually gave me a Purple Heart to wear with my uniform. I also had this actual Purple Heart that was presented to me with that certificate. [shows medal] And I also got this. This is what the Purple Heart really looked like when George Washington issued it. [shows purple heart patch] Okay, that's it right

there. It says merit. And I think it was to be worn on the left sleeve if I remember. And that's probably where you got [the saying] wear your heart on your sleeve from, that kind of thing. But also, we got the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry Unit Medal, which I didn't receive when I was in service. [shows medal] This came about after, maybe 1969 or 1970 they issued those things. So that's it altogether.

[Unidentified male speaker]: Was there any medal that commemorated service in Khe Sahn itself?
GWR: There was. See, yeah, it's funny that you mention that. It was actually for protecting the civilians, the coffee plantation and the village itself.

WC: Oh, I think it was called the Civil Action Honor Medal.
GWR: Yes, I got that also. I forgot about that one. But at that time, I mean, none of that stuff was…There was no [big] deal made out of anything. And just like I said, when I got the Conspicuous Service Medal from the State of New York signed by Governor Rockefeller. I was a counselor at Mount McGregor and we ran a veterans program there. I was in charge of the program because of my experience. They had caught on to the fact that Mount McGregor had an awful lot of Vietnam veterans that were working there as correction officers. And so, they had a ceremony just for us. For some reason, they felt that I should be reissued a Conspicuous Service Medal because the ceremony wasn't performed when they gave it to me. [When they gave it to me the first time] It was just an envelope tossed across the table. Governor Cuomo signed my second one. Then I found out I was eligible for the Extra Cross application to denote that not only was I in service, but was wounded in service.

It was quite an educational program in itself. And I have to share this because I don't think many people know. We used to run the stats all the time with Vietnam vets, or the whole Vietnam War in total. Of all the millions that served, ten percent actually saw combat. Five percent were wounded and one percent were killed. So a big disparity of people serving as opposed to people who were actually in combat. I have a Purple Heart [license] plate. The reason why I wanted that Purple Heart plate, when they offered it, was because I thought it would be a great way for me to run across fellow veterans. Once in a while, you know, somebody drives by and salutes me or I run across them, but it was shocking how few people I run across with combat experience.

So then I started going into the stats. I think also in the stats is the highest number of gunshot wounds was in the Vietnam War. So much of the fighting was close in, whereas World War II, World War I, Korea, there were a lot more artillery injuries. When I saw

that at first about the stats of gunshot wounds, I thought maybe Civil War or even maybe World War II. When I saw it was Vietnam, I started thinking, yes. Because so much of it was small unit engagements. The North Vietnamese were not stupid. They never attacked a company of Marines. They attacked a platoon to ensure that they had success. You know, if you had a sizable number of Marines out there and air support that increased the likelihood that they weren't going to succeed in their attack. But they were very, very smart, very tough people. As a matter of fact, I think because they survived on so much less food than us. I wouldn't say that we were all that much better than they were. It was just circumstances. I couldn't imagine if they had air power what the hell it would have been like for us. Or if they even had naval gunfire like what we used to experience. They called them flying boxcars. When the naval support came in, of course, we were almost always in clouds, and from the shockwaves, you could actually follow the naval round going through. It was just incredible. Of course, the accuracy from those guns shooting from the ocean over to us. Thank God none of those rounds ever fell short. Because I don't know how many hundreds of pounds those things were. It was bad enough to be on the receiving end of 175mm. I couldn't imagine anything that big. But I think that pretty much, unless___

[Unidentified male speaker]: You must have seen a lot of area bombardments. What was it like to see that?
GWR: Well, I think I mentioned it. There were many times when you didn't think it was real. You thought you were in a war production, because until you were actually getting either shrapnel or machine gun fire. Rocket rounds were the biggest. You pretty much went, oh, wow, look at that napalm, or look at those five hundred pounders. Or when they did an arc light, we got the one thousand pound bombs that saturated, which was so surreal. It's like, Oh my God. You were almost detached until you got into the real nitty-gritty.

There was something that floated through my mind over that. But on a day-to-day basis, it was still, it was pretty edgy, everything. I don't think we ever went a day where there was a lull. We were drawing fire from them or…Of course, we had orders. Now mind you, if you shot your weapon, especially if something was in the barbed wire. Our captain, I don't know why we ran across such hard-ass lieutenants. My colonel down in the brig and my captain at Khe Sanh. [Anyway] He said, If you discharge your weapon, there better be blood. And if it's not theirs, it better be yours because you're going to get an ass-whipping. Because they didn't want anybody just shooting willy-nilly. And to give you an idea of what happened…we had a lack of communication. We thought there was a guy coming in from a listening post because it was some guy just trotting up, had his rifle

like this [gestures holding his rifle casually over his shoulder] and came right through the three rows of barbed wire fences. We knew he knew the path. He got up to where the Lieutenant's bunker was, and unload his rifle at the bunker. Nobody realized it was a North Vietnamese soldier. He ran back out through the perimeter. The whole site opened up on him and nobody hit him. That's when the captain said, [imitates the lieutenant] Next time there better be blood. It's gonna have to be yours if there isn't any out there.

So, yeah, I mean, most people think when the shit hit the fan, when stuff really went down, that things got crazy like machine gunners. They had to watch it. Under that human wave assault, guys cooked the barrels on the gun because they got so caught up that they forgot to switch the barrels over. Because you were only good for, I think, around five hundred rounds per barrel or something like that. I don't remember. That's why you got the A gunner with the asbestos gloves. I mean, they had to keep switching those barrels around. But also, two hundred rounds of ammunition, like what I used to carry, and that was a lot. A lot of guys only carried one hundred, one hundred fifty. Your gun shot up an awful lot more than that. I forget what the cyclic rate of fire is, four hundred fifty rounds a minute or something like that. So technically you could shoot up all the ammunition you had in less than two minutes or a minute. So that was also hammered home. You don't put it on full automatic for anything. That’s for the movies. Real life is semi-automatic or just manual.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: You were mentioning how much stuff you were carrying. How much weight did you actually carry?
GWR: If I had to think about that, because it was shocking.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: You couldn't do it today.
GWR: No, and I remember missing my step going over a stream going up to attack and assault the hill.

WC: I think it was usually at least 60 pounds.
[Unidentified male speaker #2]: With his radio, it must have been more than that.

WC: Well, yeah.
GWR: We had the PR-25s, they were called the prick-25s because they were a prick to carry. The PR-10s, I think were the newer ones, the lighter weight. This was a big old box probably from the 1950s. But that also probably helped save me when the grenade went off. It blew off most of the radio, but that damn thing still worked with the battery hanging off of it and everything. If I had to think about what weight went on there,

because when I saw them putting the mortar rounds on, I thought, Oh my God. And then extra machine gun ammo went up there. So yeah, I couldn't imagine what I was carrying. But when you were nineteen, you didn't give much thought to it.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: How much did you weigh when you came out, and how much did you weigh when you went over?
GWR: I have a good shot of me stateside, and that was six months after. You can still see my teeth through my cheeks. I think I weighed about one hundred sixty going in, and I was just under one hundred forty. But I went from a size thirty waist down to a size twenty six.

But, oh, the thing about being poorly equipped, I had stateside boots on when I got over there. That was before they came up with the Vietnam combat boots, you know, the ones that the clay didn't stick to as much. My soles had rotted off. With whatever I could get, string or whatnot, I had to tie my soles to the top of my boot so they didn't flip-flop all over the place. When I was wounded, I remember telling them I just got my combat boots. I said, Don't let anybody get my combat boots. Take everything else you want, but I want my combat boots. I remember when they carted me into Phu Bai Hospital, they said, where the hell are you going with your boots? I said, they're going home with me. I had to go through all that time in Vietnam with those goddamn stateside boots. I want my combat boots.

WC: You still have them?
GWR: Ironically, no. You know what's crazy is, after a period of time, you cut everything loose. Except, like I mentioned earlier, I do still have my dress blues, but I'm not fitting into them. I can tell you that much.

WC: Did you stay in contact with some of the people you were in service with?
GWR: Well, yes, on a loose basis. I have this guy, Robert [unclear] 1.28.26 who just sent me the soil from 861 Alpha. I actually got to talk to him by telephone not that long ago. I got a couple CDs, and a bag of dirt and no letter. He didn't have a phone number. So anyways, Shar and I, especially Shar, backtracked it and got his phone number, went to his address. He was really shocked that we were talking about the differences in our take on what happened in the perimeter and all that. He didn't remember me loaning him my poncho liner. We were given so little stuff. I didn't even have a rain poncho or anything. Like I said, I had the shirt and pants and my boots and that was it. And my helmet. I loaned him the poncho liner when I was on duty so that he could sleep and stay warm. Of course, he never went and took a shower or bath, and it used to smell quite ripe. I didn't

want to tell him that. I remember it well because it stunk. But he once went down with me on a water run. Now here was this guy, who sounded like a really nice guy. I had a lot of fun with him on the perimeter. He went down to the water run. Every day I was bathing. This guy hadn't, the whole time I knew him, didn't bathe. He leaned down in the water and washed his mustache. [laughs] I thought, that's all you're going to do? He remembered having a poncho liner, somebody loaned it to him. I said, that was me. But then, you know, things were a little different. I think he was a machine gunner. He was a machine gunner or mortars, one of those two. But he didn't want to hang out with me because he felt I was dangerous enough, you know, just being the radio operator. He was wounded the day before and my good buddy was killed that day. We easily had fifty percent casualties out of those two days of fighting. But the stats, I wish I'd thought to bring that. The stats for casualties at Khe Sanh was really, really quite high. You know, you're dealing in the thousands. But that was over a course of time. That wasn't just the two days that I was involved.

WC: Did you join any veterans' organizations at all?
GWR: I was telling my wife, I got a request from a VFW. I do belong to the American Legion up here in Whitehall because my ancestor, Solomon Rodd, Civil War, joined the GAR, which became the American Legion post there. We have his signatures. He probably drank the same time, or the same place I was having a beer with the guys and stuff. So I joined that late, but I am a life member of the Military Order of the Purple Heart and Disabled American Veterans. I joined the VFW when I first came out of the service. The first thing they wanted to do was, [because I had] dress blues, put me in the Pearl Harbor Day Parade. I was the only one who showed up with dress uniforms. Everybody showed up with their usual hodgepodge, slap-together thing. And I felt a little uncomfortable about that. But they wanted me like their poster child. I went to their first [smoker]. I didn't know what a smoker was. So here I was, the only young Vietnam vet in there, and you got all these older guys, with beer and cigarettes, watching porn flicks. I said, I didn't come here to sit with these old-timers and watch porn flicks. So I was in one meeting and that was it. And I didn't join anything until the American Legion. Well, I did join the Military Order of the Purple Heart because I thought that that would be an active unit, but not in New York. As a matter of fact, they assigned me to my hometown, Chapter 118. It's nonexistent. There's nobody there. So the DAV, I didn't bother going in with them either. So I felt at least I joined the membership, I just was not active. But now with the American Legion up here, I think I will become more active.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: You mentioned about the guard you were working with in Mount McGregor, being a lot of veterans there. How about the customers on the other side?
GWR: Oh, I had some.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: Did anybody ever keep track of any of those to see if they were veterans?
GWR: Well, see, the true test of anybody being a veteran is you just got to see their DD-214. That tells everything. The administration wanted bodies in the program. They didn't care about so-called legitimate vets. So they got a whole bunch of inmates shipped to me. I started going through, I said, Where are your DD-214s? This was at Auburn that they were transferred into my program. He said, Oh, they didn't require that at Auburn and because we wanted to protect our rights. What if we were trained to be a sniper or something? We don't want corrections knowing about that. I said, Well, if you don't produce a DD-214, you're not in the program because you're not a real veteran. Because all you had to know was if they had been in-country, the different operations they were on and stuff like that. It was all there. And so, I was throwing out a lot of them that were not in-country veterans, especially like what they had claimed. But I was also told to lighten up. I remember the statement was, I said to my senior counselor, What do you want, window dressing? He goes, Yes, and I want recognition for it? I said, well, I'll give you the biggest display you ever want to see. If that's what you want, you're gonna get it. What am I gonna do, become a martyr? Fight them? I used to run an in-country counseling group, inmate veterans in-country, and a lot of them were very, very, very, very sad about what they did while they were over there. And I understood why they became criminals because they were into shooting civilians and all this other stuff. Committed quite a few atrocities. When I was at Khe Sanh, I started paying attention to these guys wearing strings of what looked like mushrooms. I said, What's that? He said, ears? Every NVA I killed, I cut an ear off them. I thought, find a better way to get a souvenir than ears, especially in that environment. But I was a firm believer, even if I was around a killed NVA, I wouldn't do anything. Why would you defile yourself to do something of that nature to the enemy? I mean, I didn't hate them. They were doing their job just like I was doing my job. But I understand that people got caught up in the passion at the time and whatnot.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]:This is another question. You haven't been back over since you've been out?
GWR: No.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: You haven't had a desire to?
GWR: No. My friend sent me these CDs. He just went crazy. He went all over the place over there. But he was back up at Hill 558, but they have different numbers now, but we're still 558 and 560. But Hill 861, 861 Alpha, have all reverted back to jungle. And I don't even think there's a coffee plantation there anymore. But no, I often thought that you wouldn't be able to tell anyway. And that's what he said.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: It wouldn't be the same place.
GWR: That was forty three years ago.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: It seems like every time you pick up a travel magazine today, they're advertising, Come to Vietnam. It's such a pretty place. And they make you welcome.
GWR: Well, let me tell you something. Even though I was in combat, I remember flying over Khe Sanh Base before all hell broke loose. Thinking, man, that's beautiful down there. You know, the greens, incredible. I mean, you're talking hundreds of shades of green and everything else. Of course, the Khe Sanh means red clay. The soil looked almost like it was bleeding. It's so red, especially when it's damp. If you were back at the hospital, I didn't have to say I was from Khe Sanh. They looked at my eyes. I still had all the pink. It was like dyed pink in here [gestures to his eyes] and you had the red pigmentations in your skin. They said, You were at Khe Sanh, huh? [gestures looking puzzled] [I said], How did you know? You had to get a mirror to understand. Oh, that's another thing. I never had a mirror the whole time I was over there. I used to volunteer to do many things, and one of them was I gave haircuts. And thank God nobody had mirrors, because I think some people would have kicked my ass if they saw. [laughs] And actually, in this shot here, somebody got back at me. I have one of the worst hairlines across there. It's chopped here and then drops out like that. And we didn't have any scissors, we just had a hand clipper. That's how we had to give haircuts out there.

There were a lot of funny things that [happened]. I mean, you find if you have a sense of humor, you create a sense of humor, there were a lot of funny things that went down. As a matter of fact, I think they became more funny because you were under such stress every day. I remember, at Phu Bai, on my way, my friend Johnny Rivers told me he lost his weapon and he lost all his equipment because he couldn't jump off the plane or couldn't get off the plane. I was in an outhouse and I read something this guy wrote there, “this is my last day in this blanking hell.” I thought, Oh shit, this is my first couple of days here, my God. [laughs] I feel lucky that I didn't have any time to sit back and say, Oh man, this sucks; this is awful. Because every day was rock and roll. At night, there

were a lot of fireworks and all kinds of flares being dropped and puff going over. We used to call them puff. I don't know what they called them later.

[Unidentified male speaker]: That's what they called them, puff. [Douglass AC-47, Gatling-style] miniguns.
GWR: Yeah, the miniguns. And those were every sixth round that came out of them. It looked like one solid round. And just the sound from them and everything. I was exposed to Agent Orange. Because at nighttime, it was so hot, I ran around naked. We had a luxury toilet. We had a barrel half with a two-by-four so you could actually sit and go to the bathroom. A lot of guys didn't even have a two-by-four. I mean, that's how tough it was to get stuff. I heard a plane flying over and smelled something like apple blossoms. I got completely saturated and sprayed with Agent Orange. I was treated in the field, but we didn't tie it in. We didn't know anything about Agent Orange. I didn't realize that I was exposed to Agent Orange until I ran the veterans program at Mount McGregor. We had specialists come up. Agent Orange exposure for the inmates, not for the staff.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: A friend of mine was over there for a year and he said it was just like being in Hawaii on the beach for eleven months. But then that Tet Offensive hit and they paid for it all that month.
GWR: Yes.

[Unidentified male speaker #2]: Several years after he came home, his hair started falling out. And they wouldn't admit it. He related it to Agent Orange, so he had aftereffects, but apparently you didn't have any?
GWR: I did. I had these craters. I erupted in these giant craters all over my body. I don't know if it was coincidental, but I was kind of woozy.

WC: That was when you were over there?
GWR: Yes, at Khe Sanh. When I was out doing my nature call and stark naked, I was completely covered. It was all oozy, craters, clear yellowish stuff coming out of them. They treated me in the field for it, but again, nothing was said about that. And there was no real push for Agent Orange until maybe ten, twenty years ago. But when I was running the program, they came up. I remember her name, Rosemary Duncan, and she was a really, really knowledgeable person. I said, Rosemary, I'm going to have to ask. If I tell you what happened to me, can you tell me if this was a classic symptom of anything? She goes, yes. I told her about being sprayed and I told her about the lesions all over me. She goes, yes, that's classic Agent Orange. [knocks on the table] Again, I have nothing [now]. Maybe a little mental issue, but nothing other than that. I should be okay. I figure

at age sixty three, if I don't have it by now. [directs question at his wife] But there's one thing, they did scare me about ten years ago, Shar. They called me down and said, If you were transfused, you're still not out of the woods for hepatitis, tuberculosis. Of course, from all that loss of blood, I received quite a few units of blood for transfusion. And I remember sitting there thinking, after all these years, I'm still not out of the woods for these diseases. They ran a test on me, and I was, thank God, clear of all that. So I feel very blessed that I'm a very healthy individual. That's it.

WC: Well, thank you for your interview.
GWR: You're very welcome.